

The Coleman Family Cemetery

By Barbara Glakas

It all started at a Herndon Historical Society meeting last fall. The guest speaker, a local historian, casually mentioned that there was a small, unmarked cemetery behind Herndon Middle School. He said it belonged to the Colemans, the first family to build a house in Herndon.

I had never heard about this, so I asked him if the cemetery was marked. His answer was no, it was just an overgrown plot of land next to the school's tennis courts. The conversation quickly moved on to the presentation at hand, but my curiosity had been piqued. My quest for the Coleman family cemetery had begun.

I walked over to the school one weekend to see if I could identify the cemetery. Sure enough, I saw a long, narrow strip of land surrounded by chain link fence, just next to the tennis courts.

“Could this be it?” I asked myself. The swath of land was badly overgrown and full of trees—some alive, some dead, and many fallen. It was dense with weeds and bits of trash. It looked like some old logs had been dumped there.

I decided to go home and do some research. I looked on Fairfax County's real estate tax map to see if I could find who owned that plot of land. I could see the outline of the property on the map, but it was still not clear who owned the land. I went to the Depot museum and found a few pictures of the house. I also found old photographs of the house on a website that features historic aerial photographs. Despite the pictures of the house, however, I was still not sure if I had located the cemetery.

I went back to the school to take a closer look. This time I found an opening in the fence. I went in and walked through the area, using a long branch as a walking stick. I pushed through the overgrowth and saw some interesting looking rocks. They were rather large, around 10-12 inches, and somewhat smooth. They seemed to be secured firmly into the ground.

“Could these be gravestones?” I wondered. I made sure not to move anything, as I had no way of knowing if these were grave markers or not, but they did not seem like ordinary rocks to me. They looked like rocks that had been purposefully placed.

I decided to call the historian who had first mentioned the cemetery. He, in turn, gave me the number of a gentleman who used to work for the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, who in an interesting phone conversation shared his sketchy memories of what he knew about the house and the cemetery. I also contacted Herndon's Community Development office. They sent me copies of some old documents that had to do with the development of the International Apartments and the Jefferson Mews condominiums, which surround the property. Next, I went to the Fairfax County Library's Virginia Room, where I found cemetery maps, cemetery surveys, historic building surveys, and

other miscellaneous information. I also found the name of a contact at the Fairfax County Cemetery Preservation Association.

After a few e-mails, we arranged to meet and walk through the cemetery together. When we got to the rocks that I had found earlier, she confirmed it for me—these were indeed grave markers. I learned a lot that day about gravestones: what they were typically made of, how they were placed, which direction they faced, and how far the footstones were from the headstones. We talked about possible ways to preserve the cemetery and then parted ways.

Here is what I have learned in my quest so far: In 1776, Colonel John Coleman, a militia officer during the Revolutionary War, built the first known house in Herndon. It was not too far from the present day intersection of Locust and Center Streets. The house was known as Elden, or the Elden Plantation House. The property was sold to a succession of owners throughout the years and the house was taken down in 1964 when the International Apartments and Jefferson Mews were built. The land on which the cemetery sits is now owned by Jefferson Mews.

The cemetery plot measures about 30 by 150 feet, and it is located about 75 yards northwest of where the house stood. Along with members of the Coleman family, records show that William Kitchen, father of Kitty Kitchen Hanna (see our September 16 column, “Servin’ the Pies,” for more about Kitty Kitchen), was buried there in 1850.

In 1975, members of the Herndon Home Interest Garden Club took on a small restoration project in preparation of the Town’s Bicentennial Celebration. They were unable to completely restore the cemetery, but with the Town’s help they were able to clear the area of honeysuckle and trim some trees. They found about 12 graves, some marked with fieldstones and one or two others with regular granite markers, one of which bore the name Kitchen.

To the best of my knowledge, no improvements have been made to the Coleman family cemetery since the 1970s. I have temporarily stopped my research, but my quest is not over. I plan to resume efforts this coming summer, with the goal of getting cemetery cleaned and restored out of respect for John Coleman and his family.